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# THE BOOK OF ESTHER IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORY

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## CHAPTER VII

The author of the reform—The success of the reform among the Persians—The resistance of the Jews—The contrary effect of the persecutions upon them—Their plea—Esther's relationship to Mordecai—His identity among gentiles—The necessity of his having some position at the court—His discovery of a conspiracy—His attitude towards the persecuted Jews—His refusal to bow down to the prime minister—His confession of being a Jew—The prime minister's hesitation to punish him—His action and the creed of the Jews—The significance of the casting of lots—The simultaneity of Purim with a non-Jewish festival—The *epagomena*—Haman's difficult task—The Jews in Palestine—Haman's accusation—His aim—The sanguinary style of his decree—His promise of ten thousand talents—His wealth—The king's investigations—The early promulgation of the decree—Its being reconsidered under the influence of wine.

IN the preceding chapter we learned from the pages of history that there was a Jewish persecution under the reign of Artaxerxes II. Turning to the Book of Esther, we are confronted by the fact that the chief executive of that king was an inveterate enemy of the Jews. We may thus safely conclude that those Jewish persecutions occurred at a time when this Jewish enemy stood at the head of the Persian government. But the persecutions could not have been due to a personal enmity of the prime minister towards the Jews. They were merely the outcome of the greatest movement in the spiritual life of the Persians since Zoroaster. On the other hand, we find that this minister

occupied an extraordinarily high position, without seeing any cause for his elevation. Considering all these facts, we are justified in looking for a logical connexion between the innovation of Artaxerxes II, the exalted position of his prime minister, and the enmity of the latter towards the Jews. This connexion we find in seeing in that prime minister who so severely persecuted those who did not willingly submit to the Zoroastrian reform the very author and originator of this idea. The author of the Book of Esther had no intention of writing Persian history. His sole aim was to explain the origin of Purim. He, therefore, wrote only the facts absolutely necessary for our information, 'of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and which had come unto them'. As to the other facts he refers us to 'the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia'. Moreover, the Book being compiled for the Jews of the Persian empire, the author could not touch upon the antecedents of that event, and refer to the cause of that prime minister's elevation, the corruption of the Zoroastrian religion, and the resistance of the Jews to that worship, without deeply insulting the adherents of that religion and endangering thereby the existence of the Jews.

The plan of reforming the Persian religion, by which it should gain popularity and be more easily disseminated among the subjects of the Persian empire, certainly did not originate in the muddled brains of an effeminate monarch, but was devised, as already suggested, by one of the royal councillors. It was no doubt a very clever device for the purpose of establishing Zoroastrianism as the religion of the Persian empire. However, the introduction of that innovation was extremely dangerous.

Failure to realize it might have been disastrous to the dynasty, or at least, to the king. The Holy Wars, described in the Sacred Books of the Zoroastrians, which, according to Jackson and others,<sup>1</sup> occurred in the sixth century B.C.E., could not have been forgotten in the course of two centuries. The great festival of the Magophonia established to commemorate the overthrow of Pseudo-Smerdis, who evidently had intended to abolish the Zoroastrian religion and to reintroduce the old Iranian popular belief, was, as Ctesias informs us,<sup>2</sup> still celebrated at that period. Some satraps, under the pretext of defending the purity of the Zoroastrian religion, might have caused an insurrection.<sup>3</sup> The plan could not have met with the unanimous approval of the privy council. The strict Zoroastrians could not have been a party to the corruption of their religion, and naturally advised against that reform. The biblical tradition discussed above shows that the nobility and the officials were bitterly opposed to that innovation, and submitted to it only under the penalty of death. Many officials, though indifferent to religious principles, may have shrunk from being associated in the execution of that plan, knowing well that, if it should fail and cause disaster, the

<sup>1</sup> Jackson, *Zoroaster*, p. 174; Alfred Jeremias holds the same opinion (*The Old Testament in the light of the Ancient East*, I, pp. 161 ff.) that 'Zoroaster's theology dates from the sixth century'.

<sup>2</sup> Ctesias, *Persica*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> We have already pointed out that the letter of Cyrus to the Lacedaemonians, in which he boasted of being instructed in the doctrines of the Magi, is not without significance. The Lacedaemonians had no concern whether Cyrus knew more of the religious doctrines than Artaxerxes. But he meant to indicate that in his enterprise he could reckon upon the assistance of the priesthood and the 'Church' party (see chapter IV, n. 21). Ardashir, who overthrew the empire of the Philhellenic Parthians and founded the New-Persian empire was a Magus (Darmesteter, *l. c.*, p. 55).

king would hold them responsible, and willingly sacrifice them, to appease the anger of the people, as usually happens.

Impressed by the magnitude of the plan, and being convinced by the reasons advanced, that it was the best remedy for the prevention of the empire's dissolution, Artaxerxes entrusted the execution of the plan to its author. Such a sweeping and far-reaching plan could not have been carried through by a minister with limited powers. The satraps and governors of the provinces who were not favourably inclined towards the innovation might have interfered with his ordinances, and ignored them. The royal princes might have been too proud to receive orders from an inferior in rank. Therefore, committed to that policy, the king was bound to bestow upon this minister the highest rank, exalting him over all princes, grandees, satraps, and governors of the empire. Thus it was not a favour, but a grave task, conferred upon this councillor. By his elevation he was made responsible for the success of his advice. If the contrary of his intentions should occur, and the policy inaugurated by him should cause insurrections, he was utterly ruined. This councillor, of

Esther 3. 1. course, we identify with 'Haman, the son of Hammedatha, whom the king promoted and advanced, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him'.

This councillor, however, appears to have been thoroughly acquainted with the religious sentiments of the Persian common people. The Iranians, though Zoroastrians and not worshippers of anthropomorphic images, never entirely abandoned the gods of the old popular belief. This fact is borne out by the numerous Persian proper names of the sixth and fifth centuries, which are compounded with

names of old Iranian deities.<sup>4</sup> The close intercourse with the Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, and other polytheistic nations for a considerable period was not without influence upon the religious conception of the Iranians. The latter became gradually reconciled to the idea of representations of the divine beings in which they continued to believe. Therefore the latter did not meet with any serious opposition among the Iranians. The strict Zoroastrians represented by the intellectual class, and many of the dignitaries, as it seems, though of considerable influence, formed only a small portion of the population, as Zoroaster's religion was too spiritual to attract real converts. None of them were courageous enough to raise the standard of rebellion for the religious cause. The polytheistic nations of the empire, which regarded the ruling Iranians as enemies of the gods, could not but be pleased with the religious change.

Nevertheless, the success of this reform was not quite complete. Resistance arose among a part of the population with which the prime minister never reckoned. In his official career, the Jews could not have been unknown to him, but like all the Persians who came in contact with them, he looked upon their religion as a variety of Zoroastrianism, and was not interested in finding out its exact nature. The Jews for their own sake had good reason for upholding and corroborating these incorrect opinions, as we already observed.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it was to be expected that the Jews, like all other Zoroastrians, would submit

<sup>4</sup> See chapter VI, n. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Marquart, *Fundamente*, p. 37, remarks: 'It is probable that the Jews represented to Artaxerxes their God as being essentially identical with Ahuramazda, hence his sympathy for the Jews' (see chapter V, note 51).

to the religious reform. However, the Jews formed so insignificant a fraction of the inhabitants of the Persian empire that it may be seriously doubted whether the prime minister thought of them at all, and whether their submission or resistance ever entered into the calculations of his scheme.

But the resistance of the Jews was by no means immaterial to the success of the innovation. Numerically and in all other respects they were at too great a disadvantage to apprehend on their part any serious opposition, not to say, an insurrection. But one spark may set a building aflame where there is combustible matter. The dissatisfaction of the strict Zoroastrians with the corruption of their creed might have been stimulated by the example set by the Jews, and might have found vent in a Holy War, and this was certainly a subject of serious apprehension. Being informed of the resistance of the Jews, the prime minister instructed the officials to adopt the strictest measures against them. Receiving continuous reports from all parts of the empire of their obstinacy, his mind could not have been well disposed towards them. At first he may have tried rather lenient measures to render them submissive. But seeing the futility of bending them to his will in that way, he had no course but to break their stubborn resistance by imposing upon them the most severe sentences. The condemned, of course, gave vent to their imprecations on the author of their doom. Thus it happened that this prime minister became a persecutor of the strict adherents of the Jewish religion, and was looked upon as 'an enemy of the Jews'.

The prime minister was under the delusion that a number of executions in various sections of the empire

would have the salutary effect of frightening the rest into obedience. But the effect of these executions was contrary to his expectations. The Persians had not yet had the experiences of religious persecutors, that blood is the best fertilizer for the growth of a religious creed. One martyr made numerous converts. As in former days, under Babylonian rule, the courage, devotion, and fervour of the martyrs reawakened the religious conscience slumbering in the hearts of many indifferent Jews. Many of the latter who by their conduct had not even been recognized as Jews, now openly declared their adherence to the Jewish creed, protesting against the cruel treatment of their co-religionists, and denouncing the author of those persecutions. We may doubt whether they went to the utmost limit of sacrificing themselves for their religion. But they were at least willing to share the disadvantage of being known as adherents of an unpopular creed. There may have been others less indifferent who, moved by the example set by their brethren, became strictly religious, and were ready to share the fate of the latter. The Talmud appears to be right in observing, that the Jews had again voluntarily accepted the Jewish religion, in the days of Ahasuerus.<sup>6</sup>

In former days, the Jews had been eager to demonstrate to the Persians that their own religion was closely akin to that of the latter. This policy had now to be abandoned ; for if the Jewish religion was based upon the same principles as that of Zoroaster, there was no ground why

<sup>6</sup> Shabbath 88b. The Talmud, however, in all probability did not know of these persecutions, and merely based its saying upon the verse : ' The Jews confirmed and took upon themselves ' (IX, 27), which they interpreted : ' They confirmed now (the Law) which they had taken upon themselves long ago ' (קימו מה שקבלו כבר).



it should not undergo the same change. The logical conclusion would have been that the opposition the royal decree met with on the part of the Jews, was not due to the fundamental principles of their religion, but to the obstinacy and disloyalty of its adherents. The Jews could plead their innocence only by demonstrating that their own religion prohibited the worship of idols, that 'their laws are diverse from all people'. They could easily refute the accusation of being disloyal subjects by pointing out that they had always recognized the divinity of Ahuramazda, the supreme God of the Iranians, and still continue to do the same, being thus more loyal to the Persians than all their polytheistic subjects who formerly had not the least regard for the Persian religion. This plea was irrefutable, but more harmful to their cause than silence. The Jews thus assumed the part of 'Defenders of the Faith', insisting upon the purity of Zoroaster's religion. Now intolerance toward the creeds of the non-Iranians was not a part of the scheme of that innovation, as the recognition of Anahita did not restrain them from continuing to worship their own deities. The idea of toleration, however, did not work as far as the creed of the Jews was concerned. The prime minister perceived that the religious conceptions of these people was inimical to and incompatible with the execution of his measures. He saw in this religion the root of the evil which must be eradicated. It was against Persian political principles to be intolerant towards other religious beliefs, and he may have been reluctant to depart from them and apply measures for the suppression of the Jewish religion. The latter, however, the fundamental doctrine of which was: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me . . . for I the Lord thy God am

a jealous God', could not expect tolerance from the believers in other gods, the existence of which it denied. But as long as those who resisted his ordinances were merely found sporadically, no great harm was done, and he was loath to use extreme measures against the practice of that religion. He saw that this fundamental doctrine was adhered to only by a small fraction of the Jews, and believed that with their extinction, it would be in abeyance, and no longer detrimental to the innovation. But the condition became more and more aggravated. This strictly monotheistic conception gained converts everywhere. An example of this kind we find in Mordecai.

The author of our story informs us: 'Esther had not showed her people nor her kindred'. Does the author intend to state that Esther kept secret not only her Jewish extraction but also her kinship to Mordecai? How could she have done so, since she was taken from Mordecai's house, and he went every day to inquire of the eunuchs about her?<sup>7</sup> If Mordecai was known to be a Jew, and anxious that Esther should conceal her connexion with the Jews, was he not afraid lest by his constant solicitude for her welfare the secret might leak out? The author could not be guilty of so flagrant a contradiction. This statement undoubtedly meant to imply that Esther concealed the fact that she belonged to those who were adherents of the Jewish religion. Since, however, Esther was actually of Jewish lineage, the author used the para-

<sup>7</sup> Owing to the current interpretation of the Book of Esther, this question has not yet found a satisfactory solution. Haupt, *Critical Notes*, p. 135, thinks that by some diplomatic questions Mordecai could have obtained some special information concerning Esther without revealing the fact that she was his cousin and foster-daughter. But this is impossible, since she was taken from Mordecai's house, as Paton, p. 175, and others object.

phrase 'her people and her kindred'. Thus Esther kept secret her Jewish religion.<sup>8</sup> But Mordecai did exactly the same. He was not known among the Gentiles to be a Jew.<sup>9</sup> Thus there was no reason why Esther should have concealed her kinship to Mordecai. It was by no means necessary to be of pure Persian lineage to be regarded as Persian. Herodotus states that the children of Metiochus, the son of Miltiades, were accounted Persians.<sup>10</sup> If Greeks could be so easily changed into Persians, why not Jews? Mordecai, like many other Jews of that period, was in dress, habit, language, and, in all probability, even in his name,<sup>11</sup> not in the least different from any other Persian. Having been an indifferent Jew, he was looked upon by his neighbours and casual acquaintances as a genuine Persian.

An obscure private citizen can easily conceal his identity, but not a high official who is constantly in the eye of the public which is naturally curious to learn all about his personality and pedigree. Esther, soon after her elevation to the rank of queen, procured for her cousin an office at the court. She might have done so, informing the king that Mordecai was related to her, without dwelling upon the fact that the latter was her cousin and had adopted her as his daughter. This she did after the downfall of Haman. Both Mordecai and Esther were anxious to conceal their identity, which could only be effected if the former remained in a humble position, fearing that the king on being informed of their close kinship might appoint the queen's adopted father to a high position. We

<sup>8</sup> See chapter V, n. 63.

<sup>9</sup> See chapter V.

<sup>10</sup> Herodotus VI, 41.

<sup>11</sup> We may reasonably assume that Mordecai had a Persian name (see chapter IX). The same is true of Nehemiah, cf. Marquart, *Fundamente*, p. 31.

may assume that even then the king was willing to bestow upon him some considerable office, but Esther, under some pretext, may have declined it.<sup>12</sup> However, there is no need to assume that Mordecai owed his office at the court to the king's favour. The queen had only to hint at such a request to the chief of the eunuchs or to one of the high dignitaries to procure for Mordecai this position. Thus Mordecai became one of the guards, 'sitting in the king's gate'.

Was there any urgent need for giving Mordecai a position at the court? Mordecai, being a descendant of a wealthy family, was not in need of this position for his sustenance. Nor was he ambitious to pride himself on being a court official. We have seen that Mordecai's desire that Esther should captivate the king's heart was not due to his personal ambition, but to the forethought that in time of need she might be helpful to the Jewish people. This plan showed, as we have observed, his solicitude for the welfare of his brethren but little regard for their tenets. This plan required that Mordecai should be in the proximity of the queen. As an attendant of the royal court, it was possible for him, by means of the eunuchs, in case of an emergency, to be in communication with the queen without attracting attention.

As one of the body-guards in charge of the gate of the royal palace, Mordecai was, of course, in intercourse and on friendly terms with other attendants and eunuchs about the person of the king. Thus, on one occasion, he discovered a plot against the life of the king. This plot may be identical with the conspiracy against the life of Artaxerxes, which, if Aspasia, the concubine of Cyrus, did play any

Esther 2.  
21-23.

<sup>12</sup> See Cassel's reflections upon this policy, p. 65.

part in it, must have occurred not many years after the battle of Cunaxa, as was already suggested in the fourth chapter. In that case, the servant who, according to Plutarch, divulged that conspiracy, may be identical with Mordecai. Our text is here, owing to an error of a copyist, somewhat confused. We have to read: 'In those days, when the virgins were gathered together, the second time, and while Mordecai sat in the king's gate, two of the king's eunuchs Bigthan and Teresh, of those which kept the door, were wroth' (ימים ההם בהקבץ בתולות שנית ומרדכי) <sup>13</sup>. (יושב בשער המלך קצף בנתן ותרש שני סריסי המלך משמרי הסף). Our author intends to give the date of that conspiracy: it occurred at a time when virgins were gathered again. We have seen that gatherings of this kind were an old-established institution at the Persian courts, for the purpose

<sup>13</sup> No commentator has as yet explained this passage. Wildeboer thinks that when a company of girls arrived people crowded into the court to see them, and that Mordecai took that opportunity to penetrate further into the palace than he could ordinarily go. Siegfried explains this clause as due to the clumsiness of the author. See the various views by Paton, pp. 186 ff. But while seeking the explanation how Mordecai could have discovered the conspiracy at the time of the gathering of the virgins, they overlooked the main difficulty of that passage. This can have no connexion with the conspiracy, since it is separated from the latter's description by verse 20: 'Esther had not yet shown her people nor her kindred, &c.' However, a close examination of that passage shows that it is indeed misplaced. We notice in the first place that the clause 'Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate' is repeated twice in the verses 19 and 21. Moreover, after the words **הם בימים** we would expect **בשבת מרדכי בשער המלך**, according to the author's style (cf. **הם כשבת המלך אחשוורוש** (בימים)). Therefore we suggest that some copyist omitted to write in verse 21 the clause **בהקבץ בתולות שנית**, and in order to show that it belongs after **הם בימים**, he wrote on the margin perpendicularly, there not being enough space for horizontal writing, both clauses **יושב בשער** and **מרדכי בשער המלך**; and another copyist inserted them in a wrong place, in verse 19. Thus originally they had some connexion with the conspiracy.

of replacing the faded beauties of the harem.<sup>14</sup> We may assume that they always occurred when the various governors of the provinces sent to the court a sufficient supply. We are not distinctly informed of the nature of that plot. In the conspiracy of Darius, mentioned by Plutarch, the conspirators intended to murder Artaxerxes in his bed-chamber. In our case, the conspirators were 'of the keepers of the threshold' (משמרי הסף), who evidently guarded the entrance to the king's private chambers. This may be corroborated by the fact that they were eunuchs, while it was not a requirement of those 'who sat on the king's gate' to belong to that class. Therefore we may conjecture that it was a conspiracy of the same kind. However, there is a possibility that the clause, 'when the virgins were gathered together, the second time', is more than a date, and has a deeper meaning. Did the conspirators intend to murder the king by pretending to introduce to him one of the newly arrived virgins? We may perhaps think of how Alexander of Macedonia, the son of Amyntas, destroyed the Persian embassy by introducing to them beardless youths dressed in garments of women.<sup>15</sup> We may even imagine that one of the virgins may have been a party to the conspiracy in order to avenge the death of some relatives. We may recall the case of Phaedima, the daughter of Otanes, who played a very important part in the overthrow of Smerdis.<sup>16</sup> Having been one of the guards, and on intimate terms with the other attendants, Mordecai may have been invited to join

<sup>14</sup> See chapter IV, note 12.

<sup>15</sup> Herodotus V, 20. Similar stories are told by many ancient writers, see G. Rawlinson, *Herodotus*, vol. IV, p. 190, n. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Herodotus III, 69.

the conspiracy. The fact that he disclosed it reflects no credit upon Mordecai. The king's murder would have ended all his hopes and expectations of Esther's high position for the benefit of his brethren. He had more interest in the king's life than had any one else. The king, of course, could not know this, and we may safely conjecture that the latter, as a reward for his deed, was willing to appoint him to a high office commensurate with his merits. But Mordecai, as we have seen, could not have accepted this honour.<sup>17</sup> The chief executive at that time saw no reason to promote Mordecai against his will, and was certainly well pleased with Mordecai's modesty. Nevertheless, his deed being recorded in the royal archives as that of 'a benefactor of the king', it was a valuable asset of which Mordecai could make use in time of need.

Considering that Mordecai was so anxious to advance the welfare of his brethren, the question naturally arises: Why did he not request Esther to intercede with the king on behalf of the persecuted Jews? Not having been strictly religious, Mordecai considered the recognition of Anahita a mere formality, and disapproved of the fanaticism of the strictly religious Jews. He saw in their obstinacy an act of self-destruction. We must bear in mind that, as already observed, Haman in all other respects did not interfere with the practices and observances of the Jewish religion. Moreover, Mordecai knew what importance the king attached to the innovation recently introduced into the Zoroastrian religion, seeing in it a panacea for his diseased empire, and had no expectation

<sup>17</sup> Paton, p. 192: 'Why Mordecai should not have been rewarded at once, but his services merely recorded in the annals, is hard to understand.' Similarly Siegfried and others see in it a defect of composition.

that Esther's intercession with the king would be of any avail. In doing so, Esther might have endangered her position, and would have been of no further use to the Jewish cause. But notwithstanding his disapproval of the zeal of his brethren, blood is proverbially thicker than water, and his heart bled at the sight of their misery. Its author being the prime minister, Mordecai naturally heartily detested the butcher of his brethren.

All commentators on the Book of Esther have laboured in vain in seeking a rational explanation for Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman, a homage certainly due to the chief executive and highest grandee of the empire.<sup>18</sup> Modern exegetes, who see in the events narrated in this book pure fiction, regard this point as one of the principal defects in the composition of our story. We do not blame them, as the historical events of that period which form the background of our story and the antecedents of Haman's position were not known to them. But in the light of the present exposition it is clear that Mordecai in his state of mind could not have acted in any other way. Paying homage to the relentless persecutor and murderer of his brethren was for Mordecai out of the question. No Jew with a spark of honour could have stooped to so base an action. Thus it was not vanity that prevented Mordecai from doing obeisance to the prime minister. But we might still contend that it was imprudent of Mordecai to insult the prime minister, who was entitled to the honour of *προσκύνησις*, according to the Persian law, from all his subordinates.<sup>19</sup> Mordecai should have spared

<sup>18</sup> The old explanation that Haman claimed divine honours is of course fancy (see the various views by Paton, p. 196 f.).

<sup>19</sup> Our author clearly states that it was a special command of the king.



himself that humiliation by resigning his position at the court, and would thus not have to face the prime minister. The Talmud actually blames Mordecai for his conduct.<sup>20</sup> However, we have to bear in mind that just at that period, when the conditions of the Jews became more and more precarious, it was more than ever necessary for Mordecai to remain in the proximity of Esther. He saw in his mind the time approaching when Esther's intercession would be the only means of rescuing his people. But even if Mordecai's conduct was unwise, the very fact that he dared to challenge Haman proves how deeply he was affected by the sufferings of his brethren. Carried away by his passionate hatred towards the persecutor of his people, he was unable to consider the inadvisability of insulting the former, and was even careless about his own safety. This conduct, if imprudent, redounds even more to his honour as a Jew than the great service he later rendered to the Jewish cause. In exposing his own life, Mordecai fully identified himself with the strict adherents of the Jewish religion.

Esther 3. 2. Thus while 'all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him, Mordecai bowed not, nor did him homage'. His odd behaviour could not pass unnoticed. His fellow keepers of the gate could not Herodotus tells us about the method of salutation by the Persians: 'Where the difference in rank is great, the inferior prostrates himself upon the ground.' Our author may mean that Haman was by his elevation, according to the Persian law, entitled to receive that salutation from all officials. However, it may have been a special command of the king that Haman, who occupied such a high position, should be saluted in that way by everybody; the king may have intended to show that he had appointed him as his *alter ego*, and that his authority is like that of the king.

<sup>20</sup> Megillah 13 a.

conceive of a man in his sound mind committing such an action by which one could easily forfeit his own life, if it were reported to the authorities, and were naturally curious to learn the reason of his strange behaviour. 'Then the king's servants, which were in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment?' It seems that at first he gave them an evasive answer or no answer at all, as he still kept secret the fact of his being a Jew. But as they became importunate, and repeated the same question 'from day to day', Mordecai finally broke his silence, and disclosed to them the real reason for his behaviour. His fellow keepers were to a certain degree responsible for his disrespectful behaviour, and threatened to denounce him to the proper authorities in case he should still refuse to explain it. Now he had to throw off his disguise, and frankly declared 'that he was a Jew', an adherent of the Jewish religion.<sup>21</sup> It was a sufficient reason, and his fellow-keepers readily understood that as a man of honour he could not be expected to do homage to the persecutor of his co-religionists. But being responsible for his conduct, they may have advised him to leave the court and not expose his and their lives to the penalty of the law. They did not know that he accepted that office for the purpose of being near to the queen. He seems to have confided to them the fact that he saved the king's life, and assured them that being one of 'the benefactors of the king' (*εὐεργέτης βασιλέως*<sup>22</sup>) he would not be punished, and could, if the worst happened, invoke the king's protection. It was a slim chance. Religious questions may have formed the daily topic of

<sup>21</sup> It is clearly seen that he was not recognized as Jew.

<sup>22</sup> See Herodotus III, 140; VIII, 85, and Diodorus XVII, 14.

their arguments, in which Mordecai exasperated his fellow officers by his opinions. The latter, to insure their own safety, had no other course but to report Mordecai's conduct, and convince themselves of the truth of his immunity, and in that case they would no more annoy him with their interference: 'and they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's words would stand', that is to say, his assurance that he would not be punished.<sup>23</sup>

Esther 3. 5. Why did Haman hesitate to punish Mordecai, as transgressor of the royal command, for his disrespectful conduct? The fact that Mordecai had saved the king's life could not have given him full licence to disobey consciously and persistently the royal command. The modern exegetes indeed regard this part of the story as highly improbable.<sup>24</sup> It is no surprise that they are not able to comprehend this point. They labour under the delusion that the term 'Jews' (יהודים) was a racial designation. It is perhaps due to the conditions of the Jews in the Christian era which left its impressions on their mode of thinking, that they cannot dissociate the idea of the Jewish religion from that of the Jewish race. They do not consider the possibility of a man being by descent, language, habit, and in all respects a genuine Persian, and be nevertheless, as far as religion is concerned, a real 'Jew' (יהודי). This misconception lies at the bottom of all improbabilities and impossibilities we are confronted with in the actions of Mordecai and Esther. In the opinion of the modern commentators, Haman could not have been

<sup>23</sup> Mordecai must have declared that he would continue to do so with impunity. This is the meaning of the passage: 'to see whether Mordecai's words would stand' (היעמדו דברי מרדכי).

<sup>24</sup> See Siegfried, p. 139; Paton, p. 74, and other commentators.

aware of the relationship between Mordecai and Esther, if he knew that the former was a Jew. For if he was acquainted with both facts, he could not doubt that Esther was a Jewess, and the whole story would be impossible. Seeing, however, that Esther was taken from Mordecai's house, and their relationship could not have remained a secret, and Haman knowing likewise that Mordecai belonged to the Jewish race, the commentators cannot but condemn our story as impossible. Therefore we dwelt, in the fifth chapter, on this point to demonstrate that in post-exilic times, among Jews and gentiles alike, the term 'Jews' (יהודים) had a merely religious significance. Haman, who had troubles with the Jews and was naturally interested in them, was not unacquainted with the fact that there were many among them of non-Jewish origin. Mordecai's adherence to the Jewish religion was a private matter. He could have belonged to the highest Persian nobility, and be nevertheless by religion a 'Jew' (יהודי).<sup>25</sup> He did not identify the idea of the Jewish religion with that of the Jewish race. Such an idea never entered into his calculations. He was not interested in racial problems, but in the religious question. Esther was innocent of Mordecai's adherence to the Jewish religion, and he knew that as queen she deported herself with the devotion of a true believer in the Persian religion. There is no doubt that Haman could have executed Mordecai for having persistently disregarded the royal command. Artaxerxes, who was so jealous of his authority, as we have seen in the fourth chapter, would certainly not have been lenient towards Mordecai, even if he was 'one of the king's bene-

<sup>25</sup> In a later period, Izates, the king of Adiabene, embraced Judaism (Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, XX, 4).

factors'. But Haman was too sagacious to act hastily in this case. He knew that Artaxerxes was completely under the influence of the harem. Assuming that the queen was naturally attached to her relative, Haman was afraid lest some day the queen might avenge his death. He could not have forgotten how Stateira, in order to avenge the death of her brother Teriteuchmes, had put Udiastres to a death too cruel to be described,<sup>26</sup> and how Parysatis, by her intrigues, had destroyed all the nobles and eunuchs who saved the life and the throne of Artaxerxes in the battle of Cunaxa, in order to avenge the death of her son Cyrus. It was even dangerous to harm a relative of the favourite women of the king. Therefore Haman's policy was to be on good terms with the queen, and he did not dare to punish her relative. Subsequently, however, seeing from the special distinction with which the queen treated him that it was impossible that she should care much for her relative, or that she should have approved of his disrespectful conduct towards him, Haman did not hesitate any longer to inform the king of Mordecai's disobedience to the royal command, and to ask his permission for Mordecai's execution.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ctesias 57.

<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding being all-powerful, Haman had to ask the king's permission for Mordecai's execution, and could not act on his own responsibility. Herodotus I, 137, informs us: 'The king shall not put any one to death for a single fault. . . . But in every case the services of the offender shall be set against his misdoings; and if the latter be found to outweigh the former, the aggrieved party shall then proceed to punishment'. Cf. also the story of Sandoces who was taken down from the cross, because Darius thought that the good deeds of Sandoces toward the royal house were more numerous than his evil deeds, as told by Herodotus VII, 194. Haman as chief executive learned of Mordecai's act in saving the king's life. But that fact was not an absolute protection. So did Tissaphernes, to whom Artaxerxes owed his life and throne, and was nevertheless executed.

However, the conduct of Mordecai meant more than Esther 3. 6. an insult to the dignity of the prime minister or a transgression of a royal command. His disrespect was a protest against Haman's policy. His endeavours to consolidate the empire by bringing the various inhabitants of the Persian empire into closer relations with the Persians was openly denounced and condemned. This was a matter for grave reflection. If his authority was defied in the very palace of Artaxerxes, how could he expect his ordinances to be obeyed in the provinces? Mordecai's conduct opened his eyes. He now fully realized that the numerous executions he had ordered did not produce the effect of frightening the Jews into obedience. Mordecai was not an eccentric individual, but a type of the Jews. He now clearly perceived that the religion of the Jews, unlike other religions, is detrimental to the welfare of the empire, as its existence was incompatible with the newly inaugurated innovation of the Zoroastrian religion. The Jewish faith being at the root of the evil, it had to be extirpated, by proclaiming its adherents traitors and criminals, even those who had hitherto not resisted the worship of Anahita, but still declared themselves to be 'Jews' (יהודים), and lived according to the observances of the Jewish religion. Haman now became the prototype of Antiochus Epiphanes. For the first time, the Jews were ordered 'to forsake their Laws'.

On the vernal New Year Festival, celebrated in Persia Esther 3. 7. as well as in Babylonia,<sup>28</sup> in which the gods determine the destinies of man for the coming year,<sup>29</sup> Haman cast

<sup>28</sup> Haupt (*Purim*, p. 3) remarks: 'The Persian Spring-festival . . . is no doubt based upon the Babylonian New Year's festival. It was celebrated at the vernal equinox'.

<sup>29</sup> The gods were believed to assemble themselves in the chamber of  
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lots<sup>30</sup> to ascertain by divination the fate of the Jews,<sup>31</sup> and the favourable month and day for their extermination.

Was the casting of the lots so significant an event as to afford a sufficient explanation for the name of Purim?<sup>32</sup> Astrology, according to Maimonides,<sup>33</sup> borders on idolatry. But this expression is too mild. Astrology is to all intents and purposes identical with idolatry. The belief that the planets influence the fate of man can be sustained only by identifying them with the gods of the pantheon.<sup>34</sup> The chief office of the Babylonian priests was divination, the most prominent of which was that based on the observation of the phenomena of the heavens. Diodorus, in dealing with the wisdom of the Chaldees, writes: 'The chiefs of these gods, they say, are twelve in number, to each of whom they attribute a month and a sign of the zodiac'.<sup>35</sup> The belief in constellations actually meant the recognition of the powers of the gods. If the people had seen in the planets inanimate heavenly bodies moving in obedience to

fate under the presidency of Bēl-Marduk to determine the destinies of man. Cf. Zimmern's theory on Purim (*Keilinschriften und das Alte Testament*, 1902, p. 514; *Zeitschrift für altt. Wissensch.*, 1891, pp. 152 ff.). In Persia the determiner of fate was of course Ahuramazda. It goes without saying that upon the identical idea is based the Jewish New Year Festival which is held to be the day in which the fate of Israel is determined.

<sup>30</sup> Haupt (*Purim*, p. 19) shows many parallels to the custom of casting lots on New Year.

<sup>31</sup> Haman did not only wish to discover an auspicious day and month for the execution of his plan, but also whether that plan would be approved by the gods. If he had not found an auspicious day and month, it would have shown that the gods disapproved of his plan.

<sup>32</sup> Haupt (*Purim*, p. 3) and others deny it.

<sup>33</sup> See Maimonides' letter to the men of Marseilles (cf. Steinschneider's *Hebräische Uebersetzungen des Mittelalters*, 1893, 931).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Jastrow's *Aspects of Religious Belief and Practice*, chapter V.

<sup>35</sup> Diodorus II, 3.

an inexorable law in nature, they never would have believed them to portend future events. Therefore, the prophet Jeremiah, in contrasting the power of the God of Israel with that of idols, prefaces his exhortation with the words: 'Thus saith the Lord: Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the heathen are dismayed at them'.<sup>36</sup> The belief in the signs of heaven was contrary to that in the God of Israel. As long as idolatry flourished, astrology was generally considered to be an idolatrous practice. In a late period, however, astrology assumed a different aspect. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam could easily demolish the statues and images of the gods held to govern the planets. But the belief that those heavenly bodies govern the fate of man could not be eradicated. Therefore, in order that the popular belief should not contrast with the established religions, it was tacitly admitted that the movements of the stars predict future events. And as astrology could hide itself under the wings of its scientific sister astronomy, and still cater to the superstitions of the people, it was a profitable profession, became a legitimate science, and was practised by Jews, Christians, and Mohammedans alike,<sup>37</sup> without investigating its nature and origin. Thus astrology is not a remainder of polytheism, but its fundamental factor. The Jewish astrologers about the first century B.C.E., and probably also later, were well aware of the fact that their practice was identical with idolatry, and in order to absolve their conscience, substituted for the heathen deities as governours of the planets angels under the names *Shamshi-el* (= *Shamash*), *Kokab-el* (= *Ishtar*), *Shabti-el*

<sup>36</sup> Jer. 10. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the article 'Astrology' (Blau and Kohler), in the *Jewish Encyc.*



(= Ninib), &c.,<sup>38</sup> who were in their names and functions the very images of the old gods of the pantheon. Thus to ascertain fate by divination and to select a favourable day and month for the execution of some enterprise means the practice of idolatry, as it presumes that each day and month stands under the rule of one of the gods. Though passages in the Talmud express the same notion that each of the seven days of the week is governed by planets,<sup>39</sup> this could not have been the old Rabbinic conception. There is indeed a 'Baraitha' that distinctly states that this kind of divination was prohibited, in declaring that the biblical commandment, 'Ye shall not use enchantment' refers to that 'by means of the stars' (לֹא תַחֲשׂוּ בַכּוֹכָבִים).<sup>40</sup> But though these Rabbis condemned this practice, they could not stamp it as pure idolatry, since it was generally practiced. It was different in the fourth century B.C.E., when the belief in divination was tantamount to that in the power of the gods, and monotheism and astrology were recognized as incompatible.

Now Haman's intention was to extirpate the Jewish monotheistic religion. The casting of the lots was the act of divination performed by the priests to inquire after the will of the gods. We may surely assume that this performance was not done secretly, but was solemnized in the temple with sacrifices and a stately service in the presence of the public. The execution of Haman's intention greatly depended upon the goodwill of the Gentile population,

<sup>38</sup> See the book Enoch, I, 6, 7; VII, 3. We are told that *Barakiel* taught astrology; *Kokabel*, the constellations; *Ezekael*, the knowledge of the clouds; *Arakiel*, the signs of the earth; *Shamshiel*, the signs of the sun; and *Sariel*, the course of the moon.

<sup>39</sup> Shabbath 156 a.

<sup>40</sup> Sanhedrin 68 b.

and he had to demonstrate that his action was commanded by the gods. Thus it was generally known that, according to those lots called in the Hebraized form 'Purim',<sup>41</sup> the fate of the Jews was sealed. Any expression of sympathy for the cause of the Jews among the Gentiles was silenced by the word 'Purim', indicating that no man may interfere with the will of the gods. It became, as we may say in modern parlance, the slogan of the enemies of the Jews. The conflict of Haman with the Jews was actually a struggle between Monotheism and Polytheism.<sup>42</sup> Thus we can well conceive that those who instituted the commemoration of those events used the very battle-cry of their enemies as an appropriate name of that festival,<sup>43</sup> expressing

<sup>41</sup> It is improbable that Haman cast the lots out of superstition.

<sup>42</sup> Cassel, p. 101, sees also in the casting of the lots a contrast between Judaism and paganism.

<sup>43</sup> The question whether a Persian word *pūr*, 'lot' is found, is irrelevant. What do *we* know about the old Persian language? The language of the Avesta had never been the Persian idiom. They are merely related dialects, but for the most part independent. As to Pahlavi, the language used in Persia under the Arsacides and Sassanides, it is a middle dialect between the ancient and modern Persian languages (Darmesteter, *l. c.*, p. xxxiv). We may reasonably assume that our author would never have connected *pūr* with 'lot' if he had not known that it has that meaning in the Persian language. Thus the emphatic assertion of Haupt (*Purim*, p. 16) and others that 'there is no Persian word *pūr*, meaning 'lot', is rather daring. But we need not assume that *pūr* is an original Persian word. There is no getting away from the fact that we have an equation *pur* = *abnu*, 'stone' (*S*<sup>o</sup> 114; Brünnow 6972). Now it is generally admitted that the Hebrew word גוֹרֵל 'lot', which our author identifies with *pūr*, is etymologically identical with Arabic رَجْل 'pebble'. P. Jensen was the first who suggested that *pūr*, 'lot' is connected with cuneiform *pur*, 'stone' (*Liter. Centralbl.*, 1896, No. 50, col. 1803), and he is no doubt right. Zimmern's objection that *pūru* in the cuneiform language means 'a sacrificial bowl or table' = *pashshūru* (*KAT.*, p. 518) does not invalidate Jensen's suggestion. The words *pūru* and *abnu* mean 'a stone jug' (cf. Prince, *Materials to a Sumerian Lexicon*, 1908, p. 63). But the very fact that only

at the same time how deceptive the belief in the planetary gods is and thereby decrying their power. However, it is possible that the word 'Purim' is etymologically closely connected with the name of the old Persian festival *Farwardigan*. The latter may have sounded in the language of the old Persians more closely to the Hebraized form 'Purim'. Hitzig had already compared the latter with the modern Arabic *Phur*, the name of 'the new year'.<sup>44</sup> The casting of lots on the Persian new year festival may have been a general custom which Haman also used for determining the fate of the Jews. The latter by adopting the name of the Persian new year as that of their own day of commemoration may have intended not only to commemorate the danger they had escaped but also to disguise the very nature of this festival in order not to offend the Persians.

a stone jug is called *pūru*, evidently shows that it bears this name on account of its material, and proves that *pūru* must have been a synonym of *abnu*, 'stone'. Granting, however, that *pūru* means only 'a sacrificial bowl or table', what do we know about the method of casting lots among the Babylonians and the Persians? Who may tell whether the lots were not put in a sacrificial bowl or upon a stone altar? We can well conceive that such a sacred act of divination, inquiring after the will of the gods, should have been performed in sacred vessels. We may call attention to the fact that stone vessels, according to the Rabbis (Mishnah Parah I, 2), cannot be defiled, and are used where absolute purity is required, as for 'the Water of Separation made of the ashes of a red heifer' (Num. 19). The Persian laws of purification, and perhaps also those of the Babylonians, may have been similar to those of Israel (cf., however, Vendidad, Fargard, VII, X). The Vulgate indeed translates: *missa est sors in urnam quae Hebraice dicitur phur* (cf. also Haupt, *Purim*, p. 20). When the Persians took over the New Year festival from the Babylonians, the customs connected with it and their terms were taken over at the same time. Thus the Persian word *pūr* may be a Babylonian (and originally a Sumerian) loan-word.

<sup>44</sup> In his *Geschichte Israels*, 1869, p. 280.

The lot fell upon the month of Adar. It has been contended by numerous scholars that Purim originally was a non-Jewish festival.<sup>45</sup> We believe that this contention is essentially correct. It seems, indeed, that there was a great Persian festival simultaneous with the Feast of Purim. We have already observed that the persecutions of the Jews, as a rule, occurred at the time of the high festivals of the Persians. All the year round people do not concern themselves with religion. Every man has his affairs to attend to, and cares little for the creed of his neighbours. It is different at the seasons of the festivals. The people, in high spirits, are fully devoted to their own creed and zealous for the honour of their gods. They see the Jews indifferent to their festivities, which indifference is, of course, interpreted as depreciation, and feel insulted. Their pride is hurt and their honour outraged. Some Jews may have been dragged by force to the temples, and murdered if they resisted. Others might have been compelled to express an opinion concerning the divinity of Anahita, and if it was unfavourable, might have been executed. We must bear in mind also that debauchery was always characteristic of festivities among common people. Being full of intoxicants and bereft of their senses, they were capable of committing atrocities. If Haman wanted the people to

<sup>45</sup> Ernst Meier, *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Hebräer*, 1850, p. 506; Julius Fürst, *Kanon des A. T.*, p. 104; Hitzig, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, 1869, p. 280; Zunz, *ZDMG.*, XXVII, p. 606; J. von Hammer, *Jahrb. f. Liter.*, XXXVIII, p. 49; Lagarde, *Purim*; Renan, *History*, VII, 14; Schwally, *Leben nach dem Tode*, 1893, p. 42; Hommel in Weisslowitz's *Prinz und Derwisch*, 1890; Zimmern, *KAT.*, p. 514 f.; Jensen, in Wildeboer's Commentary, p. 173; Meissner, *ZDMG.*, L, p. 296; Winckler, *Alloriental. Forschungen*, II, pp. 91 ff., 182 ff., &c. For the discussion of various views see Paton, pp. 84-94.

rise against the Jews and exterminate them, he had no better opportunity to achieve his aim than on the day of some great festival. At any other time it was doubtful whether the people could be induced to murder the Jews in cold blood. Subsequently, when the Festival of Purim was established, there was no fear that this celebration might offend the feelings of the Gentiles, as it was simultaneous and to all appearance identical with the Persian festival. On the contrary, by its introduction, the danger of future persecutions was minimised. That fact sheds a good deal of light on the attitude of the Sopherim towards the Festival of Purim, as we shall see further in Chapter IX. Now we have already suggested that the Book of Esther would never have been recorded if there had not been the fear that the event of Purim would sink into oblivion, and the festival would assume a non-Jewish character.<sup>46</sup> We see now that the fear of such a possibility was not unfounded. The Festival of Hanukkah frequently coincides with Christmas, though these festivals have not the least connexion. And among some modern Jews the former festival recedes into the background and assumes the character of Christmas. Exactly the same would have happened with the Festival of Purim, and with more reason.

What kind of festival may the Persians have celebrated in the month of Adar? The worship of Anahita being the cause of the Jewish persecutions and of the decree for their extermination, it is safe to conjecture that it was one of the festivals of that goddess. Al-Berūni states that the Sogdians celebrated the five days of the *epagomena* at the end of the year.<sup>47</sup> According to Paul de Lagarde, these five

<sup>46</sup> See chapter V.

<sup>47</sup> See Lagarde, *Purim*, p. 38.

days were dedicated to Anahita.<sup>48</sup> Lagarde and also other scholars believe that it was an 'All-Souls' Feast'.<sup>49</sup> But we have the testimony of Strabo, who lived about a thousand years before Al-Berūni and knew the Zoroastrian religion while it still flourished better than did the Mohammedan author, that Anahita was a goddess of prostitution.<sup>50</sup> The festival of a goddess of that kind was not of a very solemn and noble character, as Lagarde would have us believe, and it must have resembled a carnival rather than a festival of the dead. Lagarde contended that the Festival of Purim is identical with that of the *epagomena*.<sup>51</sup> We accept this theory, though Lagarde himself later abandoned it.<sup>52</sup> We find a distinct trace of such a connexion with the *epagomena* in the Mishna, which states: 'The Megillah may be read on the eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth days of Adar, not earlier and not later'.<sup>53</sup> These five days of which there is no trace in the Book of Esther,<sup>54</sup> seem to corre-

<sup>48</sup> See Lagarde, *Purim*, p. 53.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32. Schwally (cf. n. 45) and similarly Spiegel (*Eranische Alterthumskunde*, 1878, p. 577).

<sup>50</sup> See chapter VI. However, we have already pointed out the fact that the Babylonian goddess Ishtar corresponded also to a chthonic deity, and the same may be true of Anahita (see chapter VI, n. 15). But there can be no doubt that in Armenia at least, Anahita was a goddess of prostitution.

<sup>51</sup> Bertheau-Ryssel, p. 372, and Paton, p. 86, raise a great many objections to that theory, which are not unfounded.

<sup>52</sup> *Gött. Gel. Anz.*, 1890, p. 403.

<sup>53</sup> Mishnah Megillah 2 a.

<sup>54</sup> Now it is true the Mishnah explains very plainly how it happens that the Megillah may be read on these five days. But this explanation may date from a late period. The Talmudic deduction from the term 'in their times' (בְּמִנֵּיהֶם), instead of 'in their time' (בְּמֵנֶם) is hardly to be taken seriously (see the Talmudic discussion on that subject).

spond to the five days of the *epagomena*. Now it must be admitted that the dates of these two celebrations do not exactly agree, as the *epagomena*, according to the Jewish calendar, must have been celebrated by the Persians from the seventh to the eleventh of Nisan.<sup>55</sup> However, we scarcely know anything about the customs of the Persian festivals in antiquity, and who may assert that these five days of the Persian and Jewish festivals were not simultaneous? It is noteworthy that Pseudo-Smerdis seized the throne on the fourteenth of Adar.<sup>56</sup> This also suggests that there was some festival on that day. The worship of Anahita properly belongs to the old belief of the Magi. Hence on the day of the festival of this goddess, the Magians attempted by the means of Smerdis to overthrow Zoroaster's religion, and to re-establish their own former religion.<sup>57</sup> Thus the Magians who cast the lots and in-

<sup>55</sup> The Persians had a year of 360 days which, with the five *epagomena*, constituted a solar year of 365 days. But the Jews have a lunar year of 354 days. Thus there was a difference of eleven days between the Jewish and Persian first of Nisan. But we must consider that our knowledge of the Persian Calendar in the Achaemenian period is extremely scanty, as may be seen from the names of the months on the Behistun inscription which do not show the least resemblance to those of the Avesta, Sogdians, Chorasmians, and the Neo-Persians (see Lagarde, *Purim*, pp. 29-32). The probability that there is some connexion between the *epagomena* and the Festival of Purim cannot be denied. If the former had been celebrated on the days of Passover, we might say that the Jewish festival was changed to the fourteenth of Adar, in order not to conflict with the other festival. Since, however, the *epagomena* were celebrated at the beginning of Nisan, the Jews could have done the same. Who knows whether the *epagomena* were not celebrated in the middle of the twelfth month?

<sup>56</sup> The fourteenth of *Viakhna* (Behistun inscription, col. I, 15) is identical with the fourteenth of Adar (cf. Ed. Meyer's *Forschungen*, p. 472 f.).

<sup>57</sup> George Rawlinson rightly contended that the accession of Pseudo-Smerdis, whereby the Medes regained their ancient supremacy, was not

formed Haman that Adar would be the favourable month for the execution of his plan chose the time which Haman himself would have chosen, without the means of divination.

Thus, in the first month of the twelfth year of Artaxerxes' reign, in the year 392 B.C.E., Haman planned to exterminate all the Jews of the Persian empire. It was no easy task for Haman to inform the king that the policy inaugurated by him caused so much annoyance that he was forced to use the most extreme measures against those who opposed him. If the religious innovation had encountered the opposition of a warlike people, the downfall of Haman would have been inevitable. Artaxerxes would have sacrificed him rather than uphold his authority and thereby cause a holy war. At that period he needed his army for other purposes. It was before the Peace of Antalcidas. The Jews, however, were powerless and defenceless. But what about the Jews in Palestine? Haman did not consider them at all. It goes without saying that, if the Jewish religion had been abolished, the existence of the temple in Jerusalem would have become impossible. It would have been either demolished or changed into a heathen sanctuary. From the statement of Hecataeus of Abdera we know that the Palestinian Jews suffered greatly under those persecutions, as described in the sixth chapter.<sup>58</sup> The condition of the Jews in Judea was then hardly better than in the time of Nehemiah. They were still surrounded by hostile neighbours who were ready to attack them and to wipe out their semi-independent state. Jerusalem was

a national revolution, but the ascendancy of the Magian religion (Herodotus, vol. II, p. 457). A similar opinion is expressed by Marquart (*Fundamente*, p. 48), and approved by Ed. Meyer (*G. A.*, III, p. 123).

<sup>58</sup> Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, I.



now surrounded by a wall. However, the latter could only protect the city from a sudden attack on the part of hordes, and not against a regular army. There was no need for Haman to decree the destruction of the Judean state. The latter owed its existence to the grace of the Persian satraps. This province would have been lost if the Persians had withdrawn their protection and left it to the tender mercies of their hostile neighbours.<sup>59</sup> Therefore

<sup>59</sup> The question whether Ezra was a contemporary of Nehemiah is not solved yet, and is still a matter of dispute. Ed. Meyer (*Entst. d. Jud.*, pp. 89-92) seems to have proved that they were contemporaries. However, Batten (*Ezra*, in the *International Critical Commentary*, New York, 1913, p. 28), still contends that Ezra belongs to a later period than Nehemiah. Several of his arguments are not conclusive, and were already discussed and refuted by Ed. Meyer. But there is one point of evidence against the latter's view that deserves serious consideration. We find that Ezra went into the chamber of Joḥanan, the son of Eliashib, to spend the night there (Ezra 10. 6). The succession of High-priests described in Nehemiah (12. 22) shows that Joḥanan is identical with Jonathan (*ibid.*, 12. 11), and that he was the grandson of Eliashib, as Stade, in his *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, II, p. 153, has already proved. If Eliashib was a contemporary of Nehemiah, Ezra seems to have lived two generations later, as Batten expresses himself 'exactly where he belongs, in the reign of Artaxerxes II'. However, even this point is not absolutely convincing. It is not quite impossible that the Joḥanan, to whose chamber Ezra retired, is not identical with that Joḥanan who, according to Elephantine Papyri, was High-priest in Jerusalem in 407, as Wellhausen (*Gött. Gel. Nachr.*, 1895, 168) indeed suggests. Or it is not impossible that the compiler who revised the Ezra Memoirs, may have changed the name of the chamber, because in his time it was known under the name of 'the chamber of Joḥanan, the son of Eliashib', as Ed. Meyer thinks. Neither of the two opinions is quite satisfactory. In either case we will have to encounter a great many difficulties. But one of them must be true. If Batten is right, this fact will shed considerable light on both the Books of Esther and Ezra, and it will be seen that both are closely connected. The prayer of Ezra shows that the conditions of the Jews at his time were still unsettled, and that their existence was precarious. Batten further admits that there is no good reason whatever to doubt the genuineness of the edict of Artaxerxes II concerning the promulgation of the Law. Then the Law must have been

Haman in his decree did not allude to the Jewish province in Palestine. He aimed chiefly at the Jews living dispersed

promulgated about 396, exactly at the time of Esther. We may notice, by the way, that the fact that the Law just now received official recognition may shed some light on the religious indifference of the Jews of that period. We might even assume that the Talmudic saying: 'The Jews received the Law again in the days of Ahasuerus' (Shabbath 88 b), rests upon true tradition. But these are minor points. However, there are others of more importance. We see Ezra in high favour with Artaxerxes II. But we do not find the least reason why the king should have favoured him. If he had been an official, like Nehemiah, he would have informed us of this fact, as did Nehemiah. On the other hand, looking at the events of the Book of Esther, it seems strange that a Jewish woman occupying such a high position, who might, without disclosing her identity, confer many a boon upon her people, by predisposing the king in their favour, should remain quite indifferent to their welfare. But we notice a remarkable coincidence. In the seventh year of Artaxerxes II two events happened: In that year a Jewish woman became queen, and in the same year the Jewish Law received official recognition. Is it indeed a mere coincidence? Would it not be more logical to see a close connexion between these two events? Esther on her elevation may have called the king's attention to a people whose religion was identical with that of the Persians, and may have expressed the opinion that it would be good policy to support that creed, as the spread of the Persian religion in the Western countries would join them closer to the Persian empire. This opinion coincided with an advice urged upon him by one of the councillors to make Zoroastrianism the supreme religion of the empire, and thus prevent its disintegration. It is therefore reasonable that the same king who was desirous of disseminating his own religion for a political purpose should promote the Jewish religion which he believed to be identical with his own. Hence Ezra, the priest and chief teacher of the Eastern Jews, was entrusted with the task of promulgating the Law. He must have known to whom he was indebted for that favour. But the man in whose eyes intermarriage with Gentiles was an unpardonable crime could not tell that he owed his own position to such an intermarriage. Moreover, it would have been wrong to disclose the secret of Esther and expose his benefactress to danger. In accepting Batten's date, another problem could be solved. The edict clothed Ezra with power to punish the disobedient with death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment (Ezra 7. 26). Nevertheless he was unable to effect a single divorce, except by a pathetic appeal to the people. Something must have happened in the meantime which deprived Ezra of his power.

among the other races, who might by their rebellious conduct incite others to imitate their example. If the Jews had lived together in large numbers, they might, indeed, have risen in arms against their oppressors, as they did in a later period, under the Romans in Cyrene. But scattered and dispersed in all provinces of the empire the Jews were incapable of offering resistance.<sup>60</sup>

The elevation of Haman occurred shortly after Esther had become the wife of Artaxerxes. We therefore conjecture that the decree concerning the worship of Anahita and the refusal of the Jews to submit to it, put an end to Ezra's power. We may further conjecture that the great fast the Jews observed on the twenty-fourth of Tishri occurred in Ezra's period, not in that of Nehemiah. There was not the least reason why under the reign of Artaxerxes Longimanus, the Jews should have fasted 'with sackcloth and earth upon them' (Neh. 9.). They certainly could not have complained: 'They have dominion over our bodies and over our cattle, and *we are in great distress*'. They had their own Jewish governor, who was the king's favourite, and certainly did not oppress them. But a short time after the arrival of Ezra and promulgation of the Law, the news about the great danger to the Jewish religion reached the Jews in Judea, and Persian officials were sent into the land to erect a sanctuary to Anahita. Therefore they fasted and made a covenant among themselves to resist with all power the execution of that decree. Therefore 'the seed of Israel separated themselves from the strangers'; for 'no strangers ought to know that they intended to resist the royal decree'. This was not, as Batten (p. 363) observes: 'Because the pure-blooded son of Abraham was alone a fit object for Jahveh's favour'. However, it must be admitted that the two dates of Esther and Ezra do not agree in every detail. Ezra arrived in the fifth month of the seventh year of Artaxerxes at Jerusalem, and Esther became queen five months later. But the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah had been, as Ed. Meyer and Batten pointed out, often revised. Thus we cannot expect the dates to be correct in every detail. It is possible that the edict of the promulgation was given in the seventh year, but Ezra's arrival at Jerusalem occurred in the fifth month of the eighth year of that king's reign. The preparations for such an enormous expedition must have taken a year at least. Thus if we accept Batten's date of Ezra in the light of the present writer's exposition of the Book of Esther, all these events will be viewed differently, and numerous problems will be solved (cf. chapter V, n. 51).

<sup>60</sup> No commentator has as yet satisfactorily explained the passage:

'And Haman said unto King Ahasuerus, There is a <sup>Esther 3.8.</sup> certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not fit for the king's profit to suffer them.' Haman's accusation of the Jews and his advice to decree their extermination were worded very carefully and diplomatically. But his accusation was absolutely true. He did not slander them. And we indeed know from the Behistun inscription<sup>61</sup> and from Herodotus<sup>62</sup> that the most disgraceful deed for a Persian was to tell a lie. Haman prefaced his accusation by allaying the king's fear and forestalling any reproach, that by his advice he had plunged the empire into anarchy, in stating that the people which defies the king's authority is not dangerous in itself to the peace of the empire, being scattered and dispersed in all the provinces of the empire. But by its disobedience it sets a bad example to others and destroys the king's authority. Our author seemingly does not state that Haman expressly mentioned the name of the people he accused. That he actually did mention it, we may deduce from the peculiar expression <sup>שְׁנֵי</sup>, literally 'its being', and thus referring to a preceding noun.<sup>63</sup> The author gives only the substance of

'There is one people scattered and dispersed among the people'. This cannot be a part of the accusation. Such a condition is surely no crime, but a misfortune. Nor can it refer to the barrier of the Law, as Paton, p. 203, explains. The latter idea is expressed in the following sentence: 'Their laws are diverse from all people'. Hence that passage expresses the idea of disregard; their condition is so pitiful as not to fear their resistance.

<sup>61</sup> Behistun inscription, col. 54 ff.

<sup>62</sup> Herodotus I, 139.

<sup>63</sup> The expression <sup>שְׁנֵי</sup> does not mean 'there is'. The same form occurs also elsewhere three times (Deut. 29. 14; 1 Sam. 14. 39; 23. 23), where

Haman's report, which, of course, exhaustively dealt with the Jewish problem. Herodotus, or any Greek writer would have used for this report a full chapter.

If we had no proof that Haman aimed at the destruction of the Jewish religion and not of the Jewish race, we could deduce his intention from the words of his accusation in stating: 'their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws'. The first part of this statement is no accusation. It is no concern of the king, whether the laws of this people are peculiar or not, as long as they do not interfere with the laws of the empire. But Haman asserted that those laws are contrary to those of the empire, and prevent them from complying with the latter. Thus, there must have been Persian laws inconsistent with those of the Jews. Here we have a further corroboration of our description of the events of the period in which the Jewish religious conceptions came into conflict with the Persian laws. But if the Jewish religion is obnoxious to the welfare of the empire, it cannot be tolerated and must be suppressed, and the king would certainly have answered: Let them abandon their religion, and if they refuse, you have my permission to destroy them. This is exactly what Haman requested the king to do, in continuing to say: 'It is harmful to the king's authority to be indifferent toward their transgression of the Persian laws'.

Esther 3.  
13.

Haman certainly was an enemy of the 'Jews', as the author styles him (צורר היהודים), but not of those of Jewish extraction, as soon as they ceased to be 'Jews', in abandoning their religion. Now it is true the style of Haman's

it refers to a preceding noun. See chapter III on the impossible assumption that the king should have condemned a people to extermination whose name he did not know.

decree is so sanguinary as to represent him as the very embodiment of wickedness. But Haman is not responsible for that style, nor is the author of the Book of Esther. The heaping of synonymous expressions, 'to exterminate, to kill, and to destroy' (להשמיד להרוג ולאבד) is inconsistent with the terse style of edicts. Haman's decree must have been worded differently. Our author was a good historian and well acquainted with the style of edicts. Even if Haman had intended to exterminate the Jewish people without regard to their religion, there was no reason for the murder of little children. They could have been sold as slaves, and thus be of more profit to Haman or the people. Those exaggerations are certainly due to late interpolators, as suggested in the first chapter. The Greek version of our story has, no doubt, the original text of this passage. For it tersely states, as we should expect, ἀφανίσαι τὸ γένος τῶν Ἰουδαίων. Accordingly, the original Hebrew text of this edict must have been לאבד את (עם) היהודים, 'to destroy (the people of) the Jews', or a similar phrase. It is interesting to notice how consistent both the Hebrew and Greek versions are. The former explains the hatred of Haman towards the Jews, by the statement: 'And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had showed him the people of Mordecai'. We have already remarked that this improbable explanation is a late interpolation at a time when the real cause of Haman's action was no longer known. A man who is able to destroy a whole race on account of a single individual who insulted him, is certainly to be credited with any inhuman monstrosity. The Alexandrian translator, however, did not know of that passage, and in accordance with this, the version of Haman's decree is not sanguinary.

Esther 3. 9. Having convinced the king that the conduct of the Jews could not be tolerated, Haman substituted this proposal: 'If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries'. If the Jews were disloyal subjects and according to law deserved to be exterminated, why should Haman promise ten thousand talents for the royal permission to rid the empire of criminals? Though the victims of the persecutions may have numbered many thousands, nevertheless they represented, as we observed, merely a very small portion of the Jewish communities throughout the wide dominions of the Persian empire. We have no census of the Jews of that period, but at a very conservative estimate, they must have numbered many hundreds of thousands.<sup>64</sup> The average Jews submitted with a bad grace to the innovation, as the Rabbis correctly perceived, since they saw in the worship of Anahita a mere formality forced upon them, and had no inclination to expose themselves to persecution by their refusal. Thus the friendly relations between them and the Gentiles were not disturbed. This being so, it was doubtful whether Gentiles in many localities, seeing no reason for the wholesale massacre of their Jewish friends and neighbours against whom they felt no animosity, would

<sup>64</sup> About 140 years before that event, the Jews who returned from the captivity numbered 42,360 (Ezra 2. 64). The larger part of them had no inclination to leave Babylonia and expose themselves to the laborious task of rebuilding the home of their ancestors. It is a low estimate to assume that about 100,000 stayed behind, who preferred to move into the interior provinces of the immense empire, where as merchants they had the best opportunity of accumulating riches. Thus within 140 years they may have increased to a number of many hundred thousands, at the lowest estimate.

not resent those edicts and prevent their execution. The Jews, assisted by the population, could easily offer resistance against the force entrusted with the execution of those edicts. Therefore, to be sure of success, Haman appealed to the lowest passion of the people—greed. The lower strata, which form everywhere a considerable, if not the major, portion of the populace, are always willing to go to any extent, if they are afforded an opportunity of enriching themselves at the expense of their wealthy fellow-citizens. The Jews being mostly engaged in commerce were reputed to be very wealthy. In granting permission to the populace to keep the property of the Jews, Haman could reckon with full certainty on the carrying out of his edicts to the letter.<sup>65</sup> But how could he dispose of their property? If the Jews were condemned for their disloyalty, they were traitors, and their goods had to be confiscated to the treasury.<sup>66</sup> Thus it was necessary to reimburse the treasury for the loss it would have sustained by Haman's largess to the populace.

Have we ground to consider—as many commentators do <sup>67</sup>—the sum of ten thousand talents as estimate of the Jews' wealth, which would amount to about eighteen million dollars, an exaggeration and incredible? As far as the Jews' wealth is concerned, the estimate was far too low. Concerning Haman's ability to supply that sum of his own means, if we believe Herodotus that the Lydian Pythus offered Xerxes for his campaign against the Greeks 'two

<sup>65</sup> Paton, p. 209, correctly explains: 'This is offered as an inducement to the people to attack the Jews.'

<sup>66</sup> The property of criminals was confiscated by the State. See Herodotus III, 129 and Josephus, *Antiquities*, XII, i. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Haupt, *Purim*, p. 6; Paton, p. 206, and others.



thousand talents of silver, and of gold four million Doric staters, wanting seven thousand',<sup>68</sup> which would amount to about twenty-four million dollars,<sup>69</sup> we have no reason to doubt the statement of our author.<sup>70</sup> We may recall the immense fortunes the Roman governors amassed in a few years. The Persian satraps had the same opportunities. Haman was no doubt a satrap before he became prime minister. We may assume that his father and his progenitors had served in the same capacity. Thus he may have possessed untold riches.

Esther 3.  
10, 11.

'And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy. And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.' By Haman's offer, the king became convinced of his unselfish motives, and fully granted his request to rid the empire of those internal enemies. We might, perhaps, doubt the statement of the king's generosity in bestowing upon Haman a gift of ten thousand talents. But we find a similar statement by Herodotus of Xerxes' generosity, who declined the offer of the Lydian and said: 'The seven thousand staters which are wanting to make up thy four millions I will supply, so that the full tale may be no longer lacking and thou mayest owe the completion of the sum to me. Continue to enjoy all that thou hast acquired hitherto'.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Herodotus, VII, 27-9.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. G. Rawlinson, *Herodotus*, vol. III, p. 25, n. 1. According to Cassel, p. 110, however, the sum that Pythius offered to Xerxes would be 9,986 talents, thus about equivalent to that offered by Haman to Artaxerxes; for five darics = one mina, and 100 minas = one talent. As to the immense riches of the satraps, cf. Herod. I, 192.

<sup>70</sup> Similarly G. Rawlinson in his commentary on Esther, 1873.

<sup>71</sup> Herodotus VII, 29.

However, did the king actually believe Haman's accusation and give him full permission to deal with the Jews as he deemed proper, without any further investigation? The Persians were certainly reputed in antiquity for their high sense of justice, as Xenophon represented them in his historical romance *Cyropaedia*.<sup>72</sup> Thus how could we believe that Artaxerxes condemned a whole people without being certain of their guilt? Our author was not an orator, like the Greek writers, as we observed, and condensed Haman's accusation into a few sentences. Haman naturally dwelt thoroughly on that subject, and laid before the king the reports of the governors and officials concerning the disloyal conduct of the Jews and the disturbances everywhere, and corroborated each point of his accusation by absolute reliable documentary evidence, and, perhaps, also by the personal testimony of many satraps and governors. Convinced of the guilt of the Jews by that evidence, and persuaded by the prime minister of the futility of any other remedies to reduce them to obedience, the king could not but grant Haman the permission to exterminate them.

The letters commanding the Jews' extermination were written on the thirteenth day of the first month and 'were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to kill . . . all Jews . . . in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey. The copy of the writing for the commandment to be given in every province was

Esther 3.  
12-14.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. I, II, 6, 7, 15; I, III, 16-18. Though Xenophon actually meant to depict the Lacedaemonians, nevertheless he never would have dared to attribute those virtues to the Persians if they had not had a high reputation for the conception of justice.

published unto all people, that they should be ready against that day.' Why did Haman promulgate the decree about a year before its execution? Seeing that the modern commentators consider Haman an inveterate enemy of the Jewish race, we expect to find the explanation of that early promulgation of the decree to enhance the sufferings of the Jews by keeping them in suspense as long as possible.<sup>73</sup> Other commentators believe that it was done to give the Jews an opportunity to leave the country.<sup>74</sup> The latter explanation is certainly strange. We cannot impute to scholars ignorance of geographical knowledge and of the extent of the Persian empire at that period. Seeing that those scholars identify Ahasuerus with Xerxes, the whole of Asia, with the exception of the Ionian free cities and islands, and Egypt were under Persian dominion. Where could the Jews have found a refuge if they had left the Persian empire? Where should the Jews living in Parthia, Bactria, Sogdiana, &c., have gone? Those of Asia Minor might have sought a place of escape in the Ionian free cities. Would the latter have admitted them? Certainly not as free citizens. At the time of Artaxerxes, the Jews of the province of Judea could have escaped to Egypt, as their people did two hundred years before. However, the early promulgation of the edicts greatly redounds to the honour of Haman. He was loath to commit that wholesale slaughter, if he could avoid it. His intention was to give the Jews ample time for reflection whether it would not be more advisable to desist from their obstinacy and to abandon their exclusive position among the nations, in parting with their singular creed. That early promulgation is a further confirmation of our

<sup>73</sup> So Bertheau-Ryssel and others.

<sup>74</sup> So Keil, Rawlinson.

exposition of those events, that Haman's object was the destruction of the Jewish religion, which could not be accomplished without destroying the adherents of this creed.

'The posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment, and the decree was given in Shushan, the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed.' The statement that the king and Haman sat down to drink has a deeper meaning than generally assumed. The modern commentators are on the wrong track in explaining: 'It is meant as a very effective piece of contrast. Orders have been sent out that will throw the empire into confusion, but the king and his prime minister enjoy themselves after finishing this troublesome business.'<sup>75</sup> This passage again shows how minutely our author was acquainted with Persian customs. Herodotus states: 'It is also their general practice to deliberate upon affairs of weight when they are drunk; and then on the following day when they are sober, the decision is put before them by the master of the house in which it was made; and if it is then approved of, they act on it; if not, they put it aside. Sometimes, however, they are sober at their first deliberation, but in this case they always reconsider the matter under the influence of wine.'<sup>76</sup> Thus our author means to state that the decision to exterminate the Jews was made when the king and Haman were sober, and it was reconsidered under the influence of wine. In the light of this explanation we understand the meaning of the clause: 'and the city of Shushan was perplexed'. This passage has not yet found any reasonable explanation. The exegetes cannot believe that the Gentile population

<sup>75</sup> See Paton, p. 211.

<sup>76</sup> Herodotus I, 133.

of the capital would have felt any great grief over the destruction of the Jews. Now the news reached the people that there was a deliberation concerning the destruction of the Jews, and that it was agreed upon. Still it was not certain whether this decision would not be set aside in the second deliberation under the influence of wine. Thus the people were perplexed and kept in suspense; their curiosity was aroused. Some held that the decision would stand, and some denied; some approved and some disapproved it. The passage apparently is not in the proper place. We have, perhaps, to read: 'The king and Haman sat down to drink and the city of Shushan was perplexed; the posts went out, hastened by the king's commandment, and the decree was given in Shushan the palace' (והמלך והמן ישבו) לשתות והעיר שושן נבוכה הרצים יצאו דחופים בדבר המלך והדת נתנה (בשושן הבירה). However, the reference to the second deliberation under the influence of wine may have been an afterthought of our author.\*

\* The seven chapters printed in this and previous volumes of the JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW, together with two additional chapters and an index, will be published in book form.